

The Fertile Crescent

Chapter Preview

This chapter will introduce you to the civilizations of an ancient region of the Middle East known as the Fertile Crescent.

Section 1

Land Between Two Rivers

Section 2

Babylonia and Assyria

Section 3

The Legacy of Mesopotamia

Section 4

Mediterranean Civilizations

Section 5

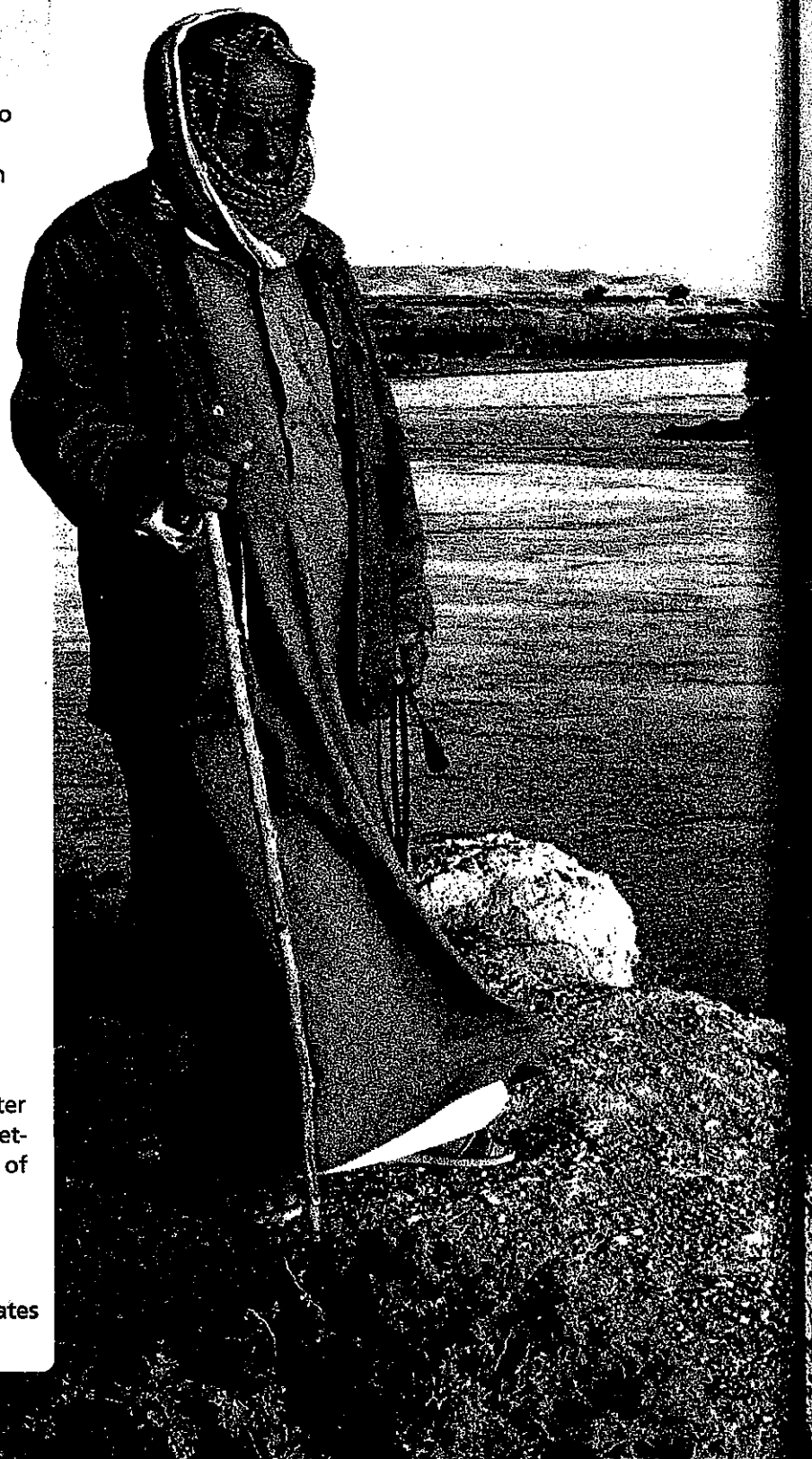
Judaism



Target Reading Skill

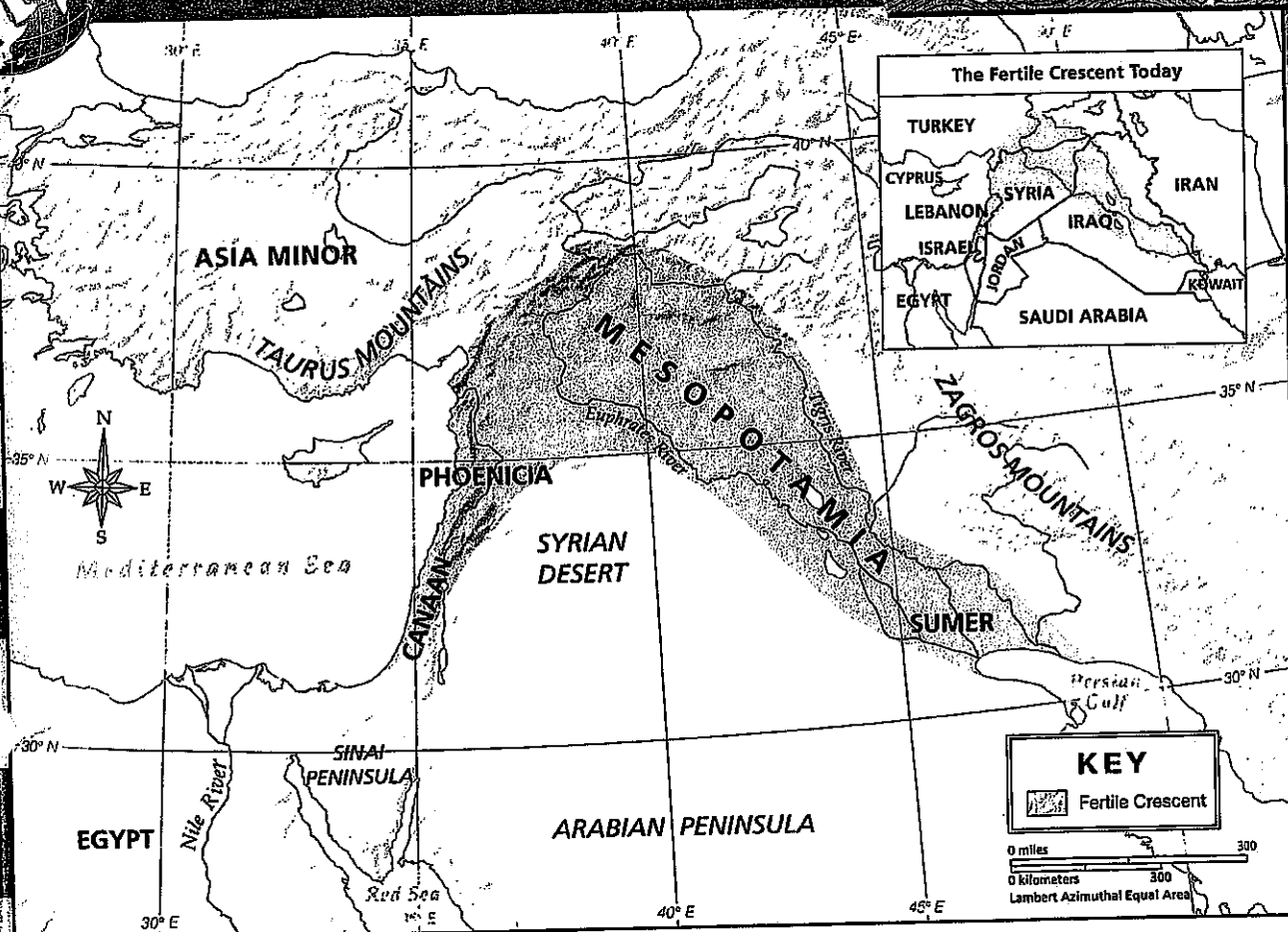
Clarifying Meaning In this chapter you will focus on clarifying, or better understanding, the meaning of what you read.

► A shepherd grazes his sheep along the banks of the Euphrates River in Syria.



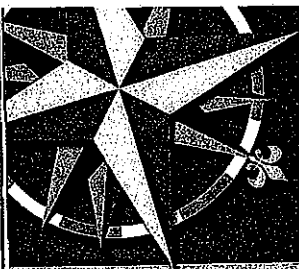
The Fertile Crescent

MAP MASTER Skills Activity



Location A region known as the Fertile Crescent stretched in an arc from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf. It had many attractions to the people of the ancient world. **Identify** What kinds of geographic features do you notice in the Fertile Crescent? **Apply Information** Which areas of the Fertile Crescent might attract invaders? Explain why.

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map skills practice.



Land Between Two Rivers

Prepare to Read

Objectives

In this section you will

1. Find out how geography made the rise of civilization in the Fertile Crescent possible.
2. Learn about Sumer's first cities.
3. Examine the characteristics of Sumerian religion.

Taking Notes

As you read, look for details about Mesopotamia and Sumer. Copy the outline below, and use it to record your findings.

I. The geographic setting

A. Mesopotamia

- 1.
- 2.

B. The Tigris and Euphrates rivers

II.

Target Reading Skill

Reread Rereading is a strategy that can help you to understand words and ideas in the text. If you do not understand a certain passage, reread it to look for connections among the words and sentences. When you reread, you may gain a better understanding of the more complicated ideas.

Key Terms

- **scribe** (skryb) *n.* a professional writer
- **Fertile Crescent** (FUR tul KRES unt) *n.* a region in Southwest Asia; site of the first civilizations
- **city-state** (SIH tee stayt) *n.* a city that is also a separate, independent state
- **polytheism** (PAHL ih thee iz um) *n.* the belief in many gods
- **myth** (mith) *n.* a traditional story; in some cultures, a legend that explains people's beliefs



The Work of Scribes

The language on this tablet—Sumerian—is the oldest known written language. **Analyze Information** Why were scribes important in Sumer?

The following words from the past come from a student at one of the world's first schools. He tells what happened to him when his homework was sloppy or when he spoke without permission.

“My headmaster read my tablet and said, ‘There is something missing,’ and hit me with a cane. . . . The fellow in charge of silence said, ‘Why did you talk without permission?’ and caned me.”

—A Sumerian student

The first known schools were set up in the land of Sumer (soo mur) over 4,000 years ago. Sumerian schools taught boys—and possibly a few girls—the new invention of writing. Graduates of the schools became scribes, or professional writers. Scribes were important because they kept records for the kings and priests: Learning to be a scribe was hard work. Students normally began school at about the age of eight and finished about ten years later. The writings Sumerian scribes left behind help to tell the story of this early civilization.



Mesopotamia

MAP MASTER Skills Activity

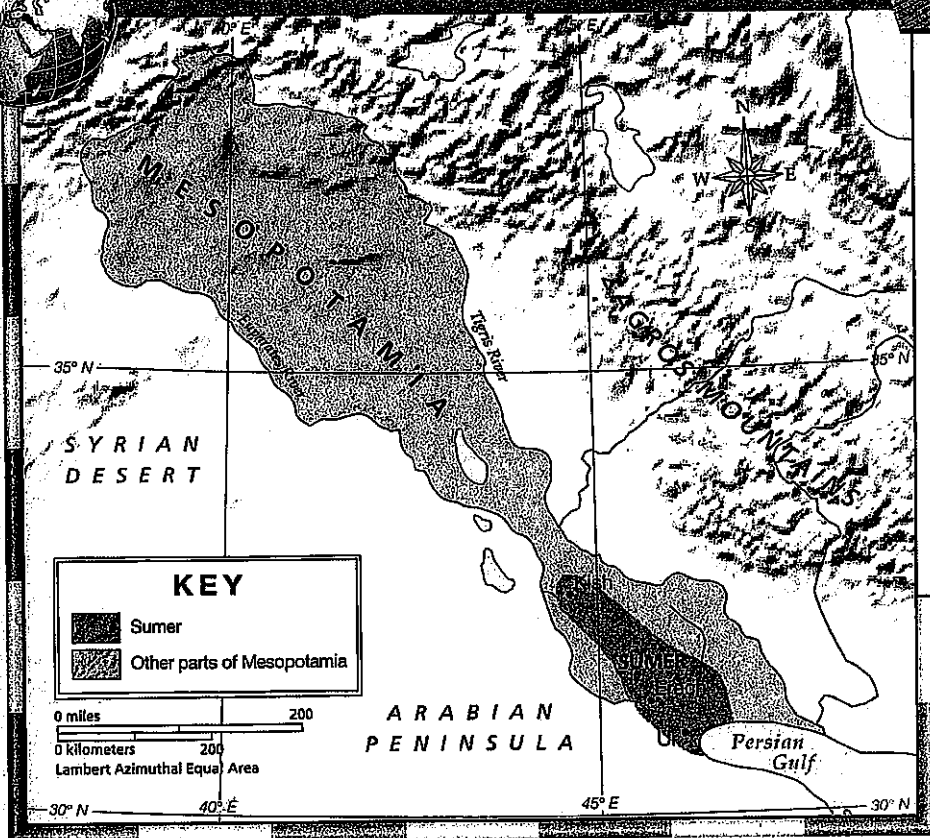
Place The Tigris and the Euphrates rivers provided excellent conditions for human settlement.

Identify Name the physical features shown on the map.

Draw Conclusions Which of the physical features shown on the map would discourage human settlement? Explain why.

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The Geographic Setting

Sumer was located in a region called Mesopotamia (mes uh puh TAY mee uh). Look at the map titled Mesopotamia. Like the place where you live, ancient Mesopotamia had special attractions that drew people to settle there. Most important, it had rich soil and life-giving rivers. These attractions drew people who became farmers and city builders. Sumer's central location within the ancient world drew many traders from other regions. Sumer became one of the most prosperous areas of the ancient world.

The Location of Mesopotamia

Mesopotamia's name describes its location. The word *Mesopotamia* comes from Greek words that mean "between the rivers." The map above shows that Mesopotamia lies between two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates.

The ruins of Uruk, an ancient Sumerian city on the Euphrates River, northwest of Ur



Mesopotamia is part of the Fertile Crescent, a region in Southwest Asia that was the site of the world's first civilizations. Turn to the map titled The Fertile Crescent on page 29. To see how this region got its name, place your finger at the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea (med uh tuh RAY nee un) on the map. Move eastward from the Mediterranean coast to Mesopotamia. Then move southeast to the Persian Gulf. Notice that the region you've traced is shaped like a crescent moon. The rivers of this crescent-shaped region helped to make it one of the best places in Southwest Asia for growing crops.

Peacetime in Sumer

Around 2500 B.C., artists from the Sumerian city-state of Ur created this mosaic recording of peacetime activities. Shown are two out of the three rows of figures.

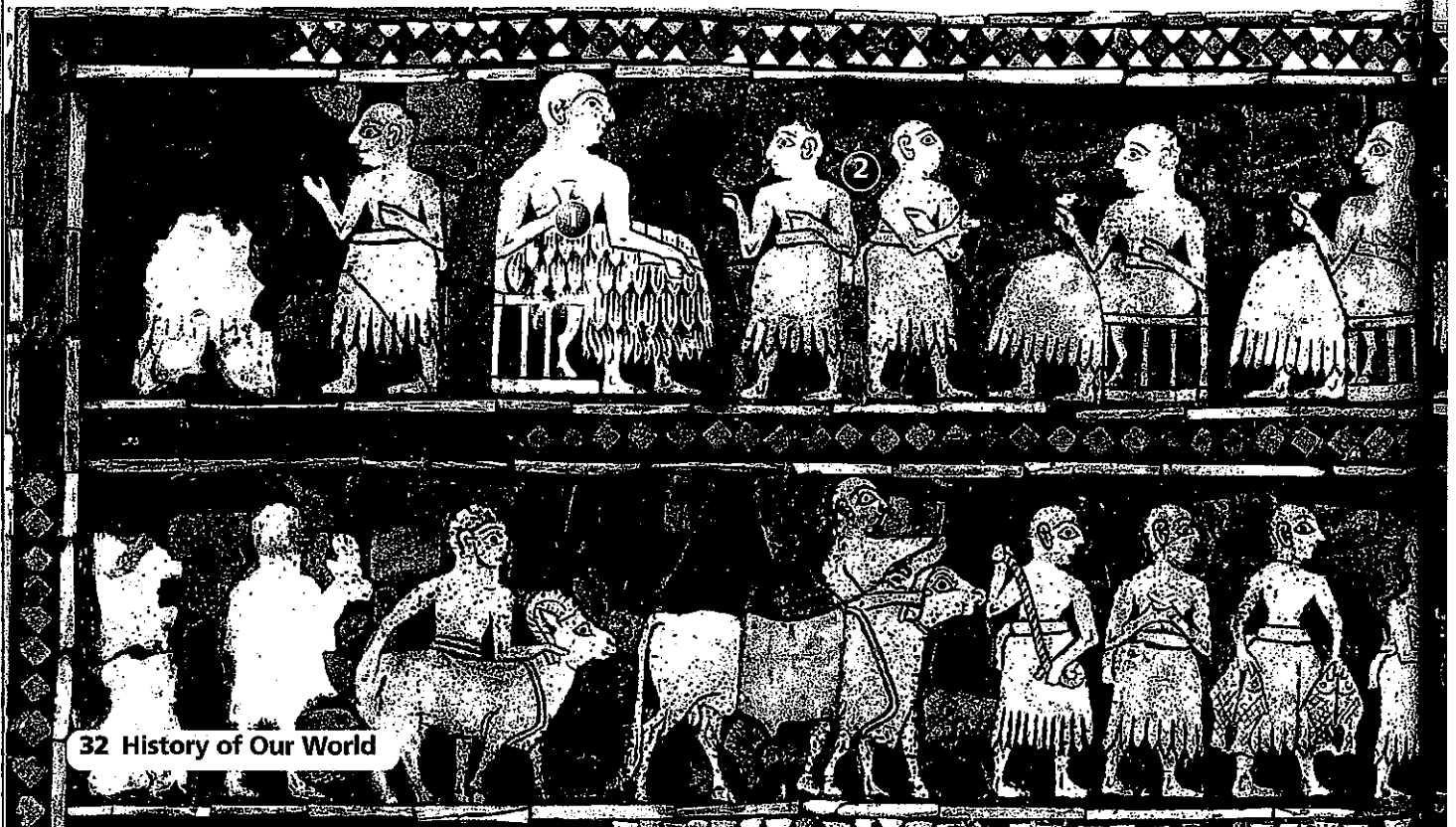
- ❶ The king sits facing members of the royal family at a banquet.
- ❷ Servants stand ready to wait upon the royal family.
- ❸ A musician playing a harp and a singer provide entertainment.
- ❹ Servants deliver animals, fish, and other items for the feast.

Infer How do the activities shown provide clues about jobs and social classes in Ur?

Rivers of Life and Death The Tigris and the Euphrates rivers were the source of life for the peoples of Mesopotamia. In the spring, melting snow picked up tons of topsoil as it rushed down from the mountains and flooded the land. The floods left this topsoil on the plain below. Farmers grew crops in this soil. The rivers also supplied fish, clay for building, and tall, strong reeds used to make boats.

The floodwaters sometimes brought sorrows as well as gifts. The floods did not always happen at the same time each year. Racing down without warning, they swept away people, animals, crops, and houses. Then, the survivors would rebuild and pray that the next flood would not be so destructive.

✓ **Reading Check** How did flooding rivers affect people who settled in Mesopotamia?



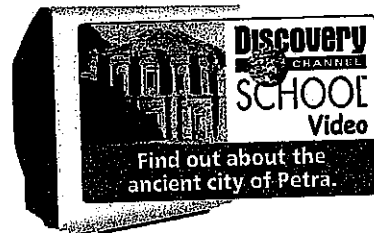
The First Cities

As farming succeeded in Mesopotamia, communities began to build up surpluses of food. In time, food surpluses encouraged the growth of cities. By 3500 B.C., some of the earliest known cities arose in the southern region of Sumer, along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

Independent Cities Form Although cities in Mesopotamia shared a common culture and language, they did not unite under a single ruler. Instead, they remained politically independent city-states. A city-state is a city that is also a separate, independent state. Each Sumerian city acted as a separate state, with its own special god or goddess, its own government, and, eventually, its own king.

A Brief Tour of a Sumerian City Public squares bustled with activity. In the marketplaces, merchants displayed goods in outdoor stalls. Musicians, acrobats, beggars, and water sellers filled the streets. For a fee, scribes wrote letters for those who could not read or write. Sumerian houses faced away from the crowded streets, onto inner courtyards where families ate and children played. On hot nights, people slept outdoors on their homes' flat roofs. Oil lamps supplied light for Sumerian homes.

✓ Reading Check How were the cities of Sumer governed?



Rereading

Reread the paragraph at left. In what ways did Sumerian cities act as states?



Sumerian Religion

A stranger coming to a Sumerian city could easily notice a giant brick building at the heart of the city. It was the ziggurat (ZIG oo rat), the site of the temple to the main god or goddess of the city.



Sumerians placed prayer figures on altars. The eyes of the worshiping figures were made wide, as though they were fixed on the gods.

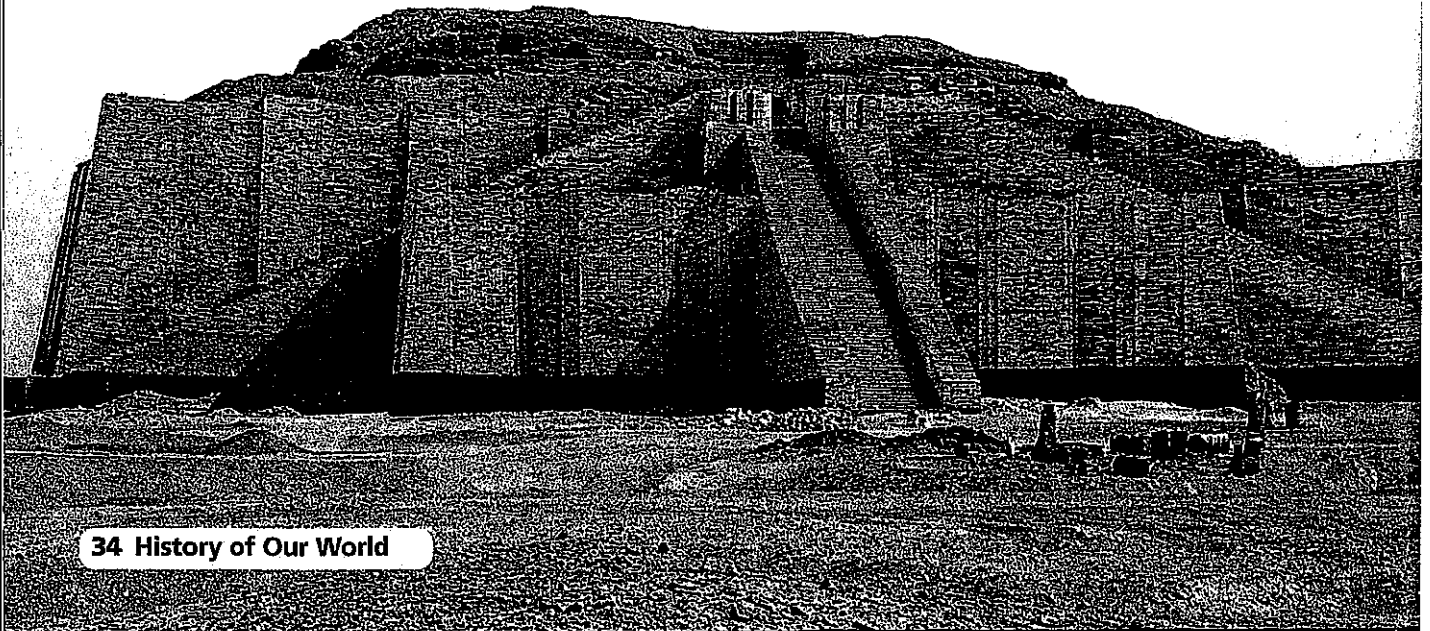
Sumerian Temples Religious, social, and economic activities all took place at the temple sites. Ziggurats were pyramids made of terraces, one on top of another, linked by ramps and stairs. Some were more than seven stories high. At the top of each ziggurat was a shrine. The Sumerians believed that gods descended to Earth using the ziggurat as a stairway.

Ancient Religious Beliefs The people of Sumer worshiped many gods and goddesses. This practice is known as **polytheism**, a belief in many gods. To understand this word, break it up into its parts. *Poly-*, a Greek prefix, means “many.” *Theism* means “belief in a god or gods.”

Sumerian **myths**, or stories about gods that explain people’s beliefs, warned that the gods would punish people who angered them. The myths also promised rewards to people who served the gods well.

Stairway to the Heavens

This partially restored brick ziggurat was part of the ancient city of Ur. **Analyze Images** Why do you think the Sumerians believed the gods could use the ziggurat to descend to Earth?



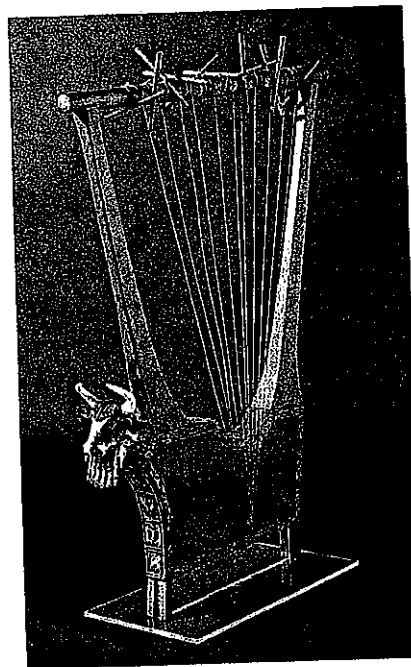
Honoring the Gods The Sumerians honored their gods in religious ceremonies. Temple priests washed the statues of gods before and after each meal was offered. Music sounded and incense burned as huge plates of food were laid before them. In most ancient religions, the food was often eaten after it was presented to the gods. Perhaps the worshipers thought that by eating the offering, they would be taking in the qualities they admired in the gods. The religious beliefs of the Sumerians give us an idea of what was important to them. Poetry was also used to express what was important to them:

“Behold the bond of Heaven and Earth, the city. . .
Behold . . . its well of good water.
Behold . . . its pure canal.”

—A Sumerian poem

The Fall of Sumer Unfortunately for Sumer, its wealth became its downfall. Sumerian city-states fought each other over land and the use of river water. Rulers from various city-states won and lost control of all of Sumer. Around 2300 B.C., Sumer was conquered by the armies of neighboring Akkad (AK ad). Its ruler, King Sargon, united the Sumerian city-states and improved Sumer’s government and its military. Sumer remained united for about 100 years until it dissolved once more into independent city-states. Sumer was no longer a major power after 2000 B.C. It fell to a northern rival, Babylonia, in the 1700s B.C.

✓ **Reading Check** What weakened the cities of Sumer?



A reconstructed musical instrument called a lyre (lyr), about 2500 B.C., from Ur

Section 1 Assessment

Key Terms

Review the key terms at the beginning of this section. Use each term in a sentence that explains its meaning.

Target Reading Skill

What word or idea were you able to clarify by rereading certain passages?

Comprehension and Critical Thinking

1. (a) **Recall** Describe the geography of Mesopotamia.

(b) **Find the Main Ideas** How did Mesopotamia’s geography help civilizations to develop in the area?

2. (a) **Compare** In what ways were Sumerian cities alike?

(b) **Contrast** In what ways were the cities of Sumer different?

3. (a) **Explain** How did Sumerians practice religion?

(b) **Infer** What do the religious practices of the Sumerians tell us about their values?

Writing Activity

Write a journal entry from the viewpoint of a student scribe in Sumer. Describe what you see on your walk to school.

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For: An activity on Sumer
Visit: PHSchool.com
Web Code: lbd-2201

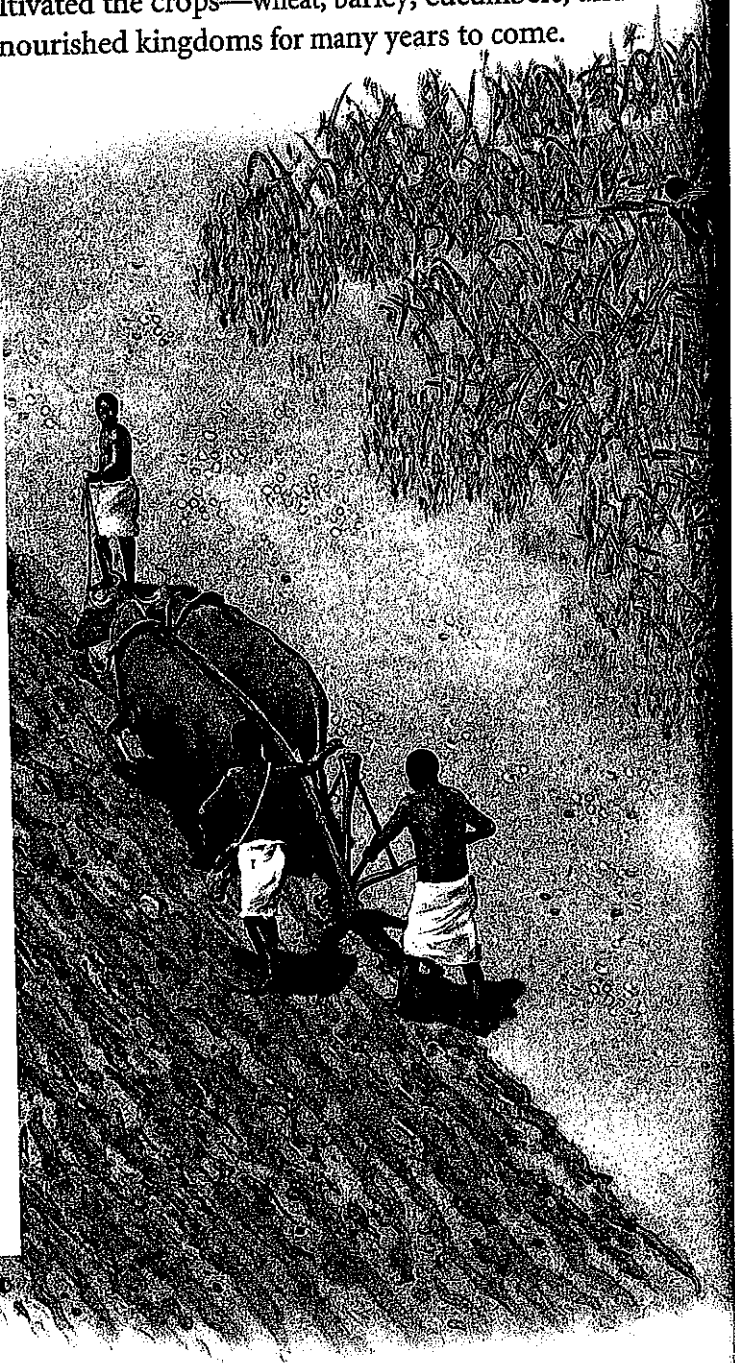
Focus On Farming in Mesopotamia

Farming the land “between the rivers” required skill and determination. The life-giving rivers could be generous one year and stingy the next. Frosts, droughts, floods, weeds, or insects could bring starvation. For survival, families worked together in farming communities. As cities rose above the Mesopotamian plain, governments created huge farms. From the river-fed land, farmers cultivated the crops—wheat, barley, cucumbers, and figs—that nourished kingdoms for many years to come.

Working the Fields Farmers in Mesopotamia were allowed a certain amount of water each year to prepare their soil for planting and to water their crops. Local officials often decided when to open the floodgates in canals, allowing water into the fields.

Farmers would let their animals graze in the wet soil, to trample and eat the weeds. The earliest farmers then broke up the soil using hand tools. This work became easier with the invention of the ox-drawn plow. After plowing, the seeds could be planted.

At first, farmers spread seeds by hand. In the 2000s B.C., they attached a funnel to the plow, as shown in the illustration, to spread the seeds easily and more evenly. After the grain was harvested, it was threshed, or pounded to separate the grain from the straw.





Farming Tools

Early farmers in Mesopotamia first used simple tools—sticks for plowing and stone-bladed sickles, like the one shown here, for harvesting grain. In time, more efficient tools were invented.



Assessment

Analyze Information Describe how farmers in Mesopotamia prepared the soil and planted their crops.

Draw Conclusions How did Mesopotamians improve their farming methods over time?

Pottery

The pottery made by Mesopotamians had many uses. The spouted vessel above, from about 3000 B.C., was found in Iraq. It may have been used to carry water. The cup, dated to 2200–1900 B.C., was found in Israel. It was probably used to measure grain.